

**'Smart' Move is Official**  
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**By, BRENDAN BERLS**  
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**The Star-Ledger**

The last moments of Ben Spinelli's nine-year tenure as mayor of Chester Township were short and sweet, and possibly every local official's ideal.

The township council meeting lasted barely 20 minutes, including Spinelli's farewell remarks, the passing of several resolutions and the adoption of a \$12 million town budget without a breath of controversy.

"I want to thank you all for being such a pleasure to work with for the last nine years," Spinelli, who announced his resignation earlier this month after being appointed to head the state Office of Smart Growth, told the four council members. "It's really been a wonderful experience to be the mayor, and I think the town's got a good fortune ahead of it."

The mayor then presented the ceremonial gavel to Leonard Taylor, the council president, who will serve as acting mayor.

More than anything else, Spinelli's time as mayor is notable for the town's proactive efforts to preserve open space and farmland in the Morris County township, an affluent exurb of about 7,200.

When Spinelli, 49, was elected in 1998, just one 27-acre farm had been preserved. Over the next decade, Chester preserved 13 more, totaling more than 1,000 acres. Three more, totaling about 220 acres, are in the pipeline. The town also preserved another 1,000 acres of open space. More than 40 percent of the 29-square mile town is now off the map, as far as developers are concerned.

In 2004, the town, with the help of Morris County, took the unusual step of buying a 60-acre farm outright, instead of just the development rights, before a developer could get his hands on it. The town then re-sold the farm with a conservation easement and, according to Spinelli, actually turned a modest profit.

"It was essential to preserve the town's character. It was essential to preserve the resources of the town as well," Spinelli said in an interview before last night's meeting.

Spinelli, a champion of a regional approach to planning, also was among the few Republicans to publicly support the landmark Highlands Act before it was passed in 2004. His support earned him the praise of Assemblyman John McKeon (D-Essex), one of the bill's main sponsors, a friend from Spinelli's childhood in West Orange.

The support also earned him a spot as one of the 15 members of the Highlands Council created by the act -- along with another environmentally friendly Republican from the Highlands, Eileen Swan of Lebanon Township.

Last year, both Swan and Spinelli were appointed to the Office of Smart Growth, Swan as director and Spinelli as counsel and policy director. (His previous day job has been as a lawyer for the Chubb Group of Insurance Cos.)

Last month, Swan returned to the Highlands Council, this time as its executive director. Spinelli was named to replace her as director and started that job about three weeks ago.

In his new job, Spinelli will play a role in the formation of the state master plan for the preservation and development of the 800,000-acre Highlands region. The plan is intended to protect the water supply of more than 5 million people. Three years ago, the Highlands Coalition presented him with its 2004 Champion of the Highlands award.

"It's a hard job -- I'm working probably harder than I've ever worked, but it's definitely interesting," he said.

The only public comments at last night's meeting were words of praise for Spinelli from Russi Champi, the captain of the local first aid squad. Joe Albano, a member of the zoning board, offered his own kudos afterward.

"He left Chester Township a better place than when he first got here," Albano said. "You enjoy so much to live in Chester Township, and I feel Ben played an integral role in bringing that about.

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